

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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Report summary

- 1 We considered the service user perspective and outcome information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders), and how this information is used.
- 2 Overall, we found that **the Council provides limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of its activities and thus, effectively manage its performance.**
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did in May 2023.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 5 We focused on the performance information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders) about service user perspective and outcomes, and how this information is used. We did not undertake a full review of the Council's performance management arrangements or an in-depth review of the quality of the data that the Council collects. Neither did the review focus on engagement with service users on specific service changes or the development of policies and strategies.
- 6 We have set out our audit questions and audit criteria in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria essentially sets out what good looks like and what we would expect to find.
- 7 Overall, we were looking for performance information to be shared with senior leaders to help them understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users and how well they are helping the Council to achieve the outcomes it is working towards. We were also looking to see that senior leaders use this information to monitor progress and take action where necessary to improve outcomes.
- 8 This is an important part of arrangements to ensure that councils are securing value for money in the use of their resources. It is also an important way in which the Council can assure itself that it is acting in accordance with the 'involvement' way of working in taking steps to meet its well-being objectives. Without this information, it is difficult to see how senior leaders can understand whether their policies and actions are having the intended impact and make changes where they are not.
- 9 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Leader of the Council/Cabinet Member Corporate Overview and Performance, the Interim Chief Executive, the Service Manager for Policy and Partnerships, and the Service Manager for Performance and Democratic. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.
- 10 We set out to answer the question '**Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of**

its activities to effectively manage its performance?’ We did this by exploring the following questions:

- Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?
- Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?
- Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?
- Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?
- Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

Why we undertook this audit

- 11 This audit was undertaken to help fulfil the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 12 We sought to:
 - gain assurance that the performance information the Council provides to senior officers and elected members enables them to understand the service user perspective and the outcome of its activities;
 - gain assurance that this information forms part of the Council's arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources and its application of the sustainable development principle; and
 - identify opportunities for the Council to strengthen its arrangements.

The Council's performance reporting arrangements

- 13 The Council produces quarterly and annual performance reports, such as its Education and Leisure Services Annual Report 2022/23, and its Regeneration and Community Services Report 2022.
- 14 The Council published its Annual Self-Assessment 2021/22 in October 2022, which covers the Council's financial and service performance and progress towards its well-being objectives, as defined within the Council's Corporate Plan. Prior to this, the Governance and Audit Committee considered the self-assessment in October 2022, in keeping with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Blaenau Gwent Corporate Plan 2022/27 was also approved by the Council in October 2022.
- 15 These reports and self-assessments provide the main opportunity for members and senior leaders to understand how well the Council is performing. The Council's Cabinet and scrutiny committees consider these reports and self-assessments.

- 16 Additional documentation such as the Council's Engagement Tracker 2022/23, its Integrated Impact Assessment 2023, and the Council's Public Engagement Report Summary 2023 were also considered within this review.
- 17 Our review focused on the above key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found

The Council provides limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of its activities and thus, effectively manage its performance

The Council provides limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users

- 18 Apart from a few limited examples, the performance information provided to senior leaders in the performance reports and self-assessment does not include information to help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users.
- 19 We found some examples of the Council using case studies, but these tend to relate to a small number of individuals and so do not provide a comprehensive and representative picture of the perspective of service users.
- 20 Whilst the Council's self-assessment report has sections titled 'How well are we doing' and 'How do we know', there is very limited information in these sections which reflects the perspective of service users.
- 21 The Council has an engagement tracker which sets out the different ways it is consulting citizens. However, the Council is not building on this in its performance reports to help senior leaders understand the views of its citizens.
- 22 Overall, therefore, it is difficult to see how senior leaders would be able to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users from the performance information presented to them.

Performance information provided to senior leaders mainly focuses on outputs and activities rather than on evaluating outcomes

- 23 The performance information the Council reports, contains some information on outcomes, for example in adult social services. However, overall, much of the information is focused upon outputs and quantitative measures with no evaluation of the outcomes of its actions. This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.

The Council has limited arrangements to ensure performance data reflecting the service user perspective and outcomes information is accurate

- 24 The Council has limited arrangements in place to routinely check the accuracy and quality of data and performance information relating to outcomes and the service user perspective.
- 25 The Council trusts its staff to be familiar with the performance data they are reporting and how this is collected. The Council's central performance team undertake sense checks of data, to understand and quality check anomalies in performance. But this does not constitute robust arrangements to check the accuracy of the performance information.
- 26 Consequently, there is a risk that performance information presented to senior leaders may be inaccurate, increasing the risk of actions being taken and resources deployed on the basis of inaccurate information.

As the information provided on outcomes and the perspective of service users is limited, the extent to which the Council can use this information to help it achieve its outcomes is also limited

- 27 As previously identified, the Council provides limited performance information to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities. It is, therefore, logical that the extent to which the Council uses the service user perspective and outcomes information to help it achieve its outcomes from this performance information will be limited.
- 28 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on outcomes and the views of service users, we found that the Council was then using this information to make changes. For example, in social services, support to carers and those who needed care was informed by the Information Advice and Assistance data, and the 'what matters' assessment process responses.

The Council has not reviewed the effectiveness of its performance information

- 29 The Council has not reviewed the information provided to senior leaders to ensure it is appropriate and relevant.
- 30 The Council is developing its new corporate plan and engagement strategy. This provides an opportunity for the Council to strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to enable them to better understand the views of service users and the impact of its actions.
- 31 It is important for the Council to ensure it benchmarks and compares its own arrangements for collecting and reporting performance information on outcomes and the service user perspective, with methods used by other organisations. This is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money. Doing this will also

help the Council understand and learn from how other councils are providing information on service user perspective and outcomes.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

R1 Information on the perspective of the service user

- The Council should strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to enable them to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.

R2 Information on its outcomes

- The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them understand the impact of its services and evaluate whether it is delivering its long-term objectives and intended outcomes.

R3 Information on the quality and accuracy of data

- The Council needs to assure itself that it has robust arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the service user and outcomes data it provides to senior leaders.

Appendix 1

Key questions and what we looked for

Exhibit 2: key questions and what we looked for

The table below sets out the question we sought to answer in carrying out this audit, along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Level 1	
Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?	
Level 2	Audit Criteria ¹ (what we are looking for)
2.1 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information is:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– relevant to the objectives the Council has set itself;– sufficient to enable an understanding of the service user perspective;– sufficient to provide an understanding of progress towards the outcomes the Council is planning to achieve;– drawn from the diversity of service users including groups who share protected characteristics; and– used to inform comparisons with the performance of similar bodies where relevant.• The Council has involved service users in determining which information to collect.
2.2 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information draws on a range of evidence sources to provide a holistic view of progress.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor progress over the short, medium and long term.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor the delivery of outcomes that cover multiple service areas and/or organisations.

¹ Our audit criteria have been informed by our cumulative knowledge of previous audit work, as well as the question hierarchy and positive indicators we have developed to support our sustainable development principle examinations.

Level 1

Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?

Level 2

Audit Criteria¹ (what we are looking for)

2.3 Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?

- The Council has clear arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the data it provides to senior leaders.
- Where weaknesses in data quality are identified, the Council addresses them.

2.4 Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?

- Where poor performance is identified, the Council uses the information to make changes/interventions.
- There is evidence of the Council improving its progress towards its outcomes as a result of interventions.

2.5 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

- The Council reviews the information provided to senior leaders to ensure it is appropriate and relevant.
- The Council compares the information it collects with the information collected by similar organisations to identify opportunities to strengthen its arrangements.



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